

## **Stage and Meta-Stage: The Superimposed Subject Matter**

*Interview by Chiara Valci Mazzara of fontaine b. with Pr. Hans Peter Kuhn  
Introductory text by Gabriela A. Covblic*

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Photography and performance art have long been associated acts, where photography was mainly documenting artistic performances. Lately, however, we notice a change in the photographic act, a change which attributes the two-dimensional artworks a new rendering.

Photography, initially meant as a tool to catalyze and reframe the ephemeral duration of a moment and block it in time, evolved to be the chosen medium to mark the evidence of the sense, of the energy, of the intangible tension in art. Sound and light installations and performance art have in common not only the characteristic of intangibility, as well as that of the use of our multiple senses (vision, hearing) - they also depend on *time*. Time supposes the presence, at some point in the duration of the act, of a sharp innuendo, which when captured photographically, provides a new essence to the photographer. By feeling it, and isolating it in a time-lapse, the photographer can shape this essence further and have it evolve an existence on its own.

Once the substance of the performance is found, a reverse process can be put in place, where the performance is no longer a live act, but rather staged, for the sake of a final photograph.

Hence, photography has been used to produce, in either series or unique pieces, works, which are now standing side by side the performer; they are complete works of art, witnesses of the process, researching and re-evaluating the media, and revealing further layers of the original installation or performance.

For this issue, *fontaine b.* decided to present a dialogue between two photographic series signed by performance artists, yet conceived within the photographic medium as a finality, and not merely as a bystander. Zhang Huan's work *Foam*, though easily confused with documentation, was in fact intended as a staged performance, a concept photograph (1). We see here four of the fifteen large-format photographs, which show the artist's face, covered in foam, holding in his mouth photographs depicting him, his wife and their families. The artist shows the people from the past, who engendered his present, slipping out of the foam, symbol of the ephemeral, of the change.

Shozo Shimamoto's photographs belonging to an untitled series portraying the back shape of his shaven head beginning in early 70's after the dissolution of the Gutai group, are unavoidably resonating with Zhang Huan's work, consisting of using the head as a support for the projection of images symbolizing time - past, present, future. The head of the artist is bearing the ideas, which then are born through his art and into the world, translating the tension of reality into readable works of art. Two of the photographs are covered in the artist's signature splashes of paint, which add a further dimension to the concept; the artist

reverses the usual process of creation - that is, performance first, and photograph later, thus limiting the content of the photograph to that of the performance - and, instead, adds his performative act on a ready made photograph, consequently empowering the medium of photography to an independent work of art.

We invited professor and artist Hans Peter Kuhn to discuss with us the role of photography in the documentation process of Performance Art, as well as Sound and Light installations, based on his extensive experience in the production of many art pieces, especially with his wife, performance artist, dancer and painter Junko Wada.

Gabriela Covblic

(1) *Foam* and *1/2* are the only two rare projects conceived as concept photographs, a medium Zhang Huan explored before leaving China for New York in 1998.

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**Chiara Valci Mazzara: Hans Peter, during your career as artist and composer, producing a vast body of works consisting in sound and light installation, radio plays, composed film music, music and environments for theatre and dance, you had the chance to collaborate and create settings in the frame of performing art as well. Moreover, given your early start as composer and performer, you surely must have kept and projected this experience and heritage onto the process of creation of performing art environments and music. Would you tell me about your role and about the production during the performance art happenings? (experience with Junko Wada for example.)**

Hans Peter Kuhn: Performances appear already pretty early in my life, during my time at school but, surely, at least since 1975 when I joined the Schaubühne am Halleschen Ufer in Berlin. Of course this was a playhouse, not so much Performance Art - at least until Robert Wilson came and did his first European production of *Death, Destruction & Detroit* in 1979. In my eyes this piece belonged more into the realm of Performance Art, than to traditional theatre, with all its abstract use of language and the presentation of images, rather than narratives.

In all the years I worked with Wilson (until 1998) and, as of 1989, I also worked with dancers, it was always my main role to create the sound environment and music for the pieces. But through my experiences as an installation artist, I also have a strong visual aspect in all my works, and for that reason, I also often create the set design and the lighting for the pieces.

When working with my wife – the painter and dancer Junko Wada – we create the pieces sort of together, simultaneously, by rehearsing and creating at the same time in the same room. This allows the productions to appear as one thing, although the ideas come from 2 people. The content of these dance pieces is mainly abstract and non-narrative about movement and sound.

**CVM: What, in your eyes, are the media that are documenting and, more precisely - representing, the eligible form in which performance art develops into a progression where photography (for**

**instance) is not anymore only documentation but, instead, is the actual - or one of the main - form to deliver the content and the concept of a performance act/work?**

HPK: The difficulty of documenting a process in space is obvious, same is true for my installations, where the site itself has a huge influence. In performance work, as in installations, the documentation – no matter what media you use, it is true for video too – are very limited in what can be shown. Even in the best photos or videos you only get a section of the whole. As one cannot tell somebody how a performance was – or at least only in a very reduced way, there is no real way to document these kind of productions. But what photography can do, is to highlight a situation, to give an impression of the intent or the quality of the work. The best photographers manage to get just that moment of a performance where all tension is presented. That is when photography makes sense in my eyes. So not so much as a documentation (although we all also use it like this) but as an art form itself, creating something beyond the straight concept of documentation. That is something that is very valuable for the performer as an outside look, but with an artistic intention, creating an artwork on the artwork, so to say.

**CVM: The series *Foam* by Zhang Huan is one of the works of the artist, which is conceived only and exclusively as photographic. Huan's production includes, together with performance, photographic works, installations, sculptural works and paintings. In this series, consisting of close-ups of the face of the artist covered with foam, he is holding in his open mouth photographs, old portraits of his wife's family. He is using his very own face as a frame to hold memories and history. A picture within a picture. What looks like a performance documentation - even if the close-ups suggest us that a specific visual rendering has been planned and structured - is in fact staged for the series of photo.**

**I wanted to ask you, in which moment do you think the 'stage' as we all refer to in Performance Art, becomes the body of the artist, and, in which - as in this case - his own face?**

**Which ones are the characteristics of the stage located above architectural and/or spatial measurements?**

**What are the features standing beyond the stage per se', which Huan translated while deciding to use his face as a stage?**

HPK: Well a stage is an elevated space where one can present something, a space separated from the other people – the audience – who have the possibility to listen to and watch this presentation. The stage lifts the performer above the rest, there is a very clear distinction between auditorium and stage, not only in classical theatre settings, also in simple black box or white cube situations where one person presents something. The stage allows to show an alter ego or any other possible character, and that is not only true for actors, in a classical sense. This is true for anybody on a stage, be it a musician, performer, scientist, lecturing teacher or a businessman presenting sales numbers. A stage gives the person on stage an authority, simply through the command over the time spending. The performer makes the people stay until the show is over (at least he/she hopes that it will happen so). It is the performer that sets the rules: come in at 8, have a pause and a drink at 9, come back in at 9:30, applaud and leave at 10:30. Completely set. But of course this is true also in less rigid schemes. Any performance has this kind of agenda. And being on stage everyone is a performer ruling in people's life.

So using one's body parts as a stage, creates another layer to this. On the one hand the performer creates his own support but, more important, her/his body becomes an authority that sets a distance with the others, the body is no longer the actual object to perceive but the carrier of an object or a message. And by this the superimposed object or message gets elevated into another layer.

But besides all this, the use of foam reminds of course of the myth of Aphrodite, who supposedly was born from foam of the sea, while here his family appears out of it.

**CVM: In the series *Foam*, what looks like close-ups on core moments of the performance, are in reality staged moments during production, anticipating the creation of the sequence. Huan set up a 'meta-stage' for his work and created a meta-performance to realize a photographic series. His mouth becomes the frame of family photographs. Shimamoto's photographs, on the other hand, create a new, under-laying basis - a new canvas(?) - for his splashes. How do you think a work of art changes when the original support changes, especially if the new support is a photograph?**

HPK: I think – as I just said – that the meta-stage is already there through the usage of the body as a stage for the work. To perform this - not "live" in front of an audience, but rather "staged" - to have it photographed, lifts this to another level, because it is no longer the performance itself, it is the concept of the performance that is presented. But since it is a series of photographs, it gets a performance style character, in which time obviously passes by.

**CVM: The images of Zhang Huan, as an expression of the self and staged on his own ancestry are visually meeting the series of photographic works of Shozo Shimamoto. The two artists are encountering each other in the use and development of the shapes of their heads: front close-up for Huan, back silhouette for Shimamoto. Both artists are conceiving an encounter between their performative act and the use of photography. In the series of Shimamoto, as well, the stage becomes the silhouette of his very own head and the splashes of colours - the witnesses of his practice - are now being developed in a photographic act. The stage - his cranium - and the light are masterfully used to realize this exclusively photographic works. What do you think about the evolution of the stage and the light used by Shimamoto? What are the specificities of both artists' re-invention of the stage that are, in your eyes similar or different?**

HPK: I think Shimamoto uses his head rather as a projection screen, while Huan changes his face physically. And the splashes of colour also hint towards a screen rather than a stage. Huan uses the face, and although these are photographs, it is a much more three-dimensional impression than the photographs of Shimamoto, which are clearly two-dimensional. Specifically, the photograph showing onto a background of buildings seems to be a straight projection, and, although it shows a bit of the curved skull, it looks mostly flat. So in my eyes Shimamoto does not make his head a stage, but rather a screen but I guess it is pretty understandable, since he did all these performances and the photographs are rather a different layer in a different media. Also, in contrary to Huan's photographs, there is not really a performative aspect. They are stills, that get even more still by the color splashes, that obviously are done onto the existing image. They are not part of the image of his head, while Huan's pictures in his mouth are directly integrated into the landscape of his face and the different small pictures give a timeline, with slightly changing content, as in performances. Shimamoto's stills are pictures that remind me more of Gerhard Richter's overpainted photographs. They stay pictures.

**CVM: In your perception, having worked with your wife Junko Wada, artist and performer, realizing together performative happenings and you realizing the landscape and the sound, which one is the role of the body when it comes to be, as for Huan and Shimamoto, the stage of an act, functioning as landscape for the photographic works?**

HPK: I think only in Huan's work I directly see this landscape character. Also the fact that his face is covered with foam creates a hybrid landscape of his natural features and the random and artificial distribution of the foam. Shimamoto's photographs are rather like a map of a landscape.

**CVM: Which one is the importance of photography, when it comes to be not anymore a development of the performative documentation but is rather conceived as an actual art piece meant as a photographic work?**

HPK: Shimamoto's pictures are certainly further away from a documentation than Huan's, they left the stage completely and don't even try to be one. It is a distinct different level or layer than the performances that probably were the base for these photographs. Although the paint on these images come from his performance process, they still are part of a projection and not a direct documentation.

With Huan's photographs it is different, they show much more the sequence of images of his performance, but due to the large number of similar pictures with only small differences (different photos in mouth/foam structures) They create a meta-structure and by that a new image that is not itself performative anymore nor a documentation but adds by multiplication a greater distance to the original performance and become a photographic artwork.

**CVM: Thank you, dear Hans Peter!**